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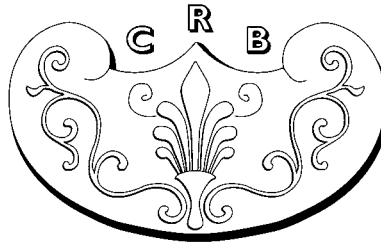
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Essay by William Voegeli

THE POLITICAL CONTRADICTIONS OF TRUMPISM

Christopher Lasch and the new populist order's struggles to be born.

REPUBLICANS' APPREHENSIONS ABOUT the 2026 midterm elections, now less than six months away, increase by the week. Democrats have stacked one win on top of another in the off-year and special elections held since 2024. According to the Real Clear Politics (RCP) average of public opinion surveys, President Trump's approval/disapproval numbers are nearly identical to what they were eight years ago: just over 40% of people like the job he's doing; nearly 56% do not. Sixty-one percent of Americans believe the country is on the wrong track, as opposed to 34% who think it's heading in the right direction, percentages slightly more pessimistic than they were at the same point in Donald Trump's first presidential term. A favorable map that year allowed the GOP to secure a net gain of two Senate seats in the midterm elections, but a blue wave inundated Republicans everywhere else, yielding Democrats 40 additional House seats, seven governorships, a gain of some 350 state legislators, and new majorities in six state legislative chambers.

The newest variable in the 2026 midterm equation, the war in Iran, is also unpopular. The latest RCP averages show that 57% disapprove of military action there, versus 39% who favor it. Disapproval of the war tracks the price of gasoline, which climbed after the beginning of military hostilities in Iran, reaching its highest level since 2022 two months after

the first shots were fired. The RCP averages show that Americans disapprove of Trump's overall handling of the economy by a margin of 60% to 35%, and of his actions with respect to inflation by 67% to 28%.

Currently, the predictions markets make Democrats a prohibitive favorite to win the handful of additional seats necessary to regain a majority in the House of Representatives, while rating as a toss-up their chances to secure the net gain of four senators that would give them control of both chambers. Those outcomes would mean that the lame-duck phase of Trump's presidency would begin with a vengeance, literally, in November 2026. Not only would Democrats have the means and motive to thwart and torment their nemesis, Republican politicians looking to 2028 and beyond would have stronger incentives than at any point since 2016 to differentiate their policy positions and political brands from Donald Trump's.

Who Hates Whom

IT'S LIKELY, THEN, THAT "PEAK TRUMPISM" and even "post-Trumpism" will soon be hot topics. This prospect is all the more interesting given that, eleven years after history's most famous escalator ride, doubts remain and disagreements continue about the meaning of Trumpism. As long as the man him-

self is still a fixture on the political scene, his digressive remarks and social media posts—which resist efforts to tease out central organizing principles—are the final authority on the meaning of Trumpism. Of course Trump is hardly the first president who relishes political action while disdaining political theory. During a 1964 campaign stop Lyndon Johnson distilled his political philosophy—or his aversion to having a political philosophy—when he told a crowd, "We're in favor of a lot of things and we're against mighty few."

But the need for evidence, logic, and axioms was addressed by popular, widely discussed books that both reflected the thinking in Democratic circles at the time and built political support for LBJ's proposals. The best examples are John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958) and Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962), which laid out the basis for what became Johnson's Great Society and War on Poverty. Similarly, George Gilder's *Wealth and Poverty* (1981) and Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* (1984) elaborated and fortified the argument for the Reagan Revolution in economic and social policy, respectively.

Strangely, the counterpart to such influential books was published, not at the dawn of the Trump era, but more than 20 years before it. And its author, intellectual historian Christopher Lasch, was a man of the Left—

idiosyncratically, but not so idiosyncratically that one can imagine him speaking at, or even attending, a Trump rally. In a 2017 article in *The Baffler*, journalist Chris Lehmann, one of Lasch's graduate students at the University of Rochester, where Lasch taught from 1970 until his death in 1974 at age 61, lamented the association of Lasch with Trumpism, insisting that "the whole intellectual and moral carapace of the soi-disant 'populist' Trump movement—would have horrified [Lasch], full stop."

This assessment is hard to dispute, but so is David Brooks's observation in *The Atlantic* last year that Lasch's *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (1995), a posthumously published collection of revised essays, "is to MAGA what Marx was to Lenin." That is, "[a]lmost everything that Trump and J.D. Vance are saying today was said first by Lasch 30 years ago: The establishment betrayed the people and created a culture that makes the working class feel like strangers in their own land." In 2017, while Steve Bannon was a senior counselor and chief strategist in the Trump Administration, Axios reported that he had named *The Revolt of the Elites* one of his favorite books, describing it as the best source for explicating grievances the Democratic Party either didn't know or didn't care about, dismissiveness which led to 2016's astonishing election result.

If Lasch's book is the decoder ring that makes sense of Trumpism, it does so not by laying out a political theory, much less a policy agenda. Rather, *The Revolt of the Elites* provides a social and historical analysis consonant with Trump-style populism. Those who first encountered the book at some point during the past ten years would come away with the sense that the Trump phenomenon was a *possible* result of the ills Lasch describes. But such readers would also realize that it was not difficult for Trumpists, even if their knowledge of *The Revolt of the Elites* was second-hand, to turn its impassioned critique into an argument that Trump's election was a *necessary* repudiation of the arrogant, feckless elites who have betrayed democracy.

Above all, Lasch and Trumpists tell stories that have the same villain, an element whose political importance is difficult to exaggerate. Political analyst Kevin Phillips said in 1968, "The whole secret of politics is knowing who hates who [*sic*]." Without benefit of Phillips's rubric, Franklin Roosevelt rallied support for the New Deal in 1936 by excoriating "malefactors of great wealth," borrowing a phrase his cousin Theodore had coined in a 1907 presidential address. Thirty-two years after FDR's re-election campaign, George Wallace

ran for president as a third-party candidate by heaping scorn on "pointy-head college professors who can't even park a bicycle straight," as well as anti-war (and anti-Wallace) demonstrators who knew every four-letter word except "W-O-R-K and S-O-A-P."

The Deploring and the Deplored

THE REVOLT OF THE ELITES REALLY VIL-lainizes just one elite, those who constitute the "new aristocracy of brains," which Lasch also describes as the "thinking classes," the "caring class," or the "professional and managerial class." They are, like all cohorts atop a hierarchy, outnumbered but far from outgunned, as his reference to their domination of decision-making roles in American society makes clear.

The failure of this ruling class is that its great power has not been matched by a strong sense of responsibility or solicitude for the rest of the nation. So completely have members of this class "removed themselves from the common life," that "[m]any of them have ceased to think of themselves as Americans in any important sense, implicated in America's destiny for better or worse." In particular, this elite resents sharing a country with the white working class, finding its instinctive conservatism incomprehensible and menacing. "It is the working and lower middle classes," Lasch writes, "that favor limits on abortion, cling to the two-parent family as a source of stability in a turbulent world, resist experiments with 'alternative lifestyles,' and harbor deep reservations about affirmative action and other ventures in large-scale social engineering."

In turn, the social engineers' "hygienic conception of life" impels them to "crusade to sanitize American society," such as by banishing "hate speech." "When confronted with resistance to these initiatives," however,

they betray the venomous hatred that lies not far beneath the smiling face of upper-middle-class benevolence. Opposition makes humanitarians forget the liberal virtues they claim to uphold. They become petulant, self-righteous, intolerant. In the heat of political controversy, they find it impossible to conceal their contempt for those who stubbornly refuse to see the light.

In other words, Lasch launched a laser-guided missile that landed, more than 20 years later, on Hillary Clinton's remarks about the "basket of deplorables," who are "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it." The worst of them, she

continued, "are irredeemable, but thankfully they are not America." Clinton's litany of unforgiveable offenses bears out Lasch's contention that the "thinking classes seem to labor under the delusion that they alone have overcome racial prejudice. The rest of the country, in their view, remains incorrigibly racist."

As Lasch describes it, our ruling class looks down on all those they govern, but does so in different ways. For groups designated minorities or victims, the moral imperative is to extend them compassion, to always provide the benefit of the doubt. The trouble is that "[c]ompassion has become the human face of contempt." It is the indulgent, non-judgmental attitude reserved for those whom we exempt from standards that govern the rest of society. "We have become too proficient," Lasch laments, "in making excuses for the 'disadvantaged.'" To take a recent, specific criticism of the same phenomenon, "The march on Charlottesville was white supremacy, but so too is asking black people to show up to Zoom meetings on time," according to a 2023 *Washington Post* essay by Tyler Austin Harper, who writes frequently about race relations. *The Revolt of the Elites* makes clear that liberal compassion condescends to its objects in ways that steadily reduce them to wards of the state. Doing so, in turn, fortifies and expands the role of the ruling class as wardens of the state. The result is to "institutionalize competence in the caring class, which arrogates to itself the job of looking out for everybody else."

Conversely, the white working class never receives the benefit of the doubt. They, according to the professional and managerial class worldview, are the main reason that the groups designated victims became, or at any rate remain, victims. It is not just happenstance, then, that the collateral damage of social engineering falls "disproportionately," as Lasch observes, "on the lower-middle and working classes." That those held to be most guilty of bigotry should face the repercussions of the indulgent double-standards for the disadvantaged is fitting and may ultimately edify the lower orders. "The policies advanced by new-class liberals on behalf of the downtrodden and oppressed—racial integration of the public schools, for example—require sacrifices from the ethnic minorities who share the inner cities with the poor, seldom from the suburban liberals who design and support those policies."

Lasch appears to be, as David Brooks contends, one of the first to single out this particular elite for this particular criticism. *The Revolt of the Elites* feels prescient because the Trump campaigns revealed that it was possible to forge a previously unsuspected elec-

toral majority by running against the ruling class Lasch targeted. Trump's success, more than the power of Lasch's logic and rhetoric, explains why the Lasch idiom has become the MAGA idiom.

To take one example of many, consider the speech delivered to the 2019 National Conservatism Conference by Josh Hawley, Republican senator from Missouri. Our era's "great divide," he said, is between "the leadership elite and the great and broad middle of our society." This "cosmopolitan elite," he continued, "look down on the common affections that once bound this nation together: things like place and national feeling and religious faith." Because "the reigning political consensus...denigrates the common affections and common loves that make our way of life possible," the leadership elite has "pursued a program the American middle does not espouse, does not support, and does not benefit from."

The Chosen

GIVEN THE STRONG SIMILARITIES between *The Revolt of the Elites's* argument and the Trumpist theory of the case, it is not surprising that Lasch and MAGA share certain difficulties. The most important are: 1) how to think about, and what to *do* about, modern meritocracy; and 2) whether to address the economic insecurity of the working classes—the core of the Republican coalition under Trump—through policies associated with the 20th-century Democratic Party: tax-and-transfer redistribution, and more aggressive government regulation of private enterprise.

When considering meritocracy, we might note first that "elite," increasingly common in our day and increasingly used to condemn rather than to praise, derives through French from the Latin verb "eligere," meaning "to choose." The elite are the chosen. Since World War II, in America and throughout the developed world, the means by which they are chosen has been an educational system that relies on standardized tests, and other measures considered rigorous and objective, to identify the best students, steer them to the best universities, and then on to the best, most socially consequential, careers. The centrality of this role is conveyed by the fact that the universities in question are routinely described as the "most selective."

The result, as Nicholas Lemann wrote in *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (1999), is that "our universities have evolved into a national personnel department." Doing so not only changed

how educational institutions understood themselves, but how they are viewed by others. Particularly for upper-quintile families, Lemann writes, they have become "an object of yearning, an all-powerful arbiter of fates." The extent of the resulting frenzy was made clear in 2019 when 53 people, including affluent parents of high school students and employees at Yale, Stanford, Georgetown, and other universities, were convicted for their participation in a bribery scheme to secure college admission for otherwise doubtful applicants.

Employers are no less fixated. In *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* (2015), sociologist Lauren Rivera shows that the biggest and most powerful law firms, investment banks, and management consulting firms recruit prospective staffers from, at most, a dozen or so of the nation's most prestigious, exclusive educational institutions. As one attorney recruiting for a top law firm told her, "Number one people go to number one schools."

Christopher Lasch objects in *The Revolt of the Elites* not so much to the harshness or un-

Meritocracy, Lasch concludes, has become "a parody of democracy."

fairness of our meritocratic process as to the results of that process. The idea behind the test- and education-based meritocracy was to supplant the old elite, the WASP establishment, with a new, more deserving, diverse, representative, and capable elite. The fact that a poor kid from a poor school who aces his SAT exams is more likely than his great-grandfather to go to Harvard and then Wall Street or Capitol Hill does not, in Lasch's view, compel us to acquiesce in the new meritocracy's sense of social responsibility, much weaker than its predecessor's. The self-satisfied belief that it is "a self-made elite owing its privileges exclusively to its own efforts" makes members of the new ruling class *more* likely than the old one to "exercise power irresponsibly," Lasch contends, since "they recognize so few obligations...to the communities they profess to lead."

Aristocrats were proud, focused "on the inheritance of an ancient lineage and on the obligation to defend its honor." Meritocrats are merely arrogant. Meritocracy, Lasch concludes, has become "a parody of democracy." The democratic effort to give the talented and ambitious a better chance to advance has had

the undemocratic consequence of creating a new ruling class that interprets its credentials as a license to pursue its own agenda and further its own interests while disregarding those who fall outside the elite. Used as a verb, "merit" is a synonym of "deserve." Those who rise to the top of the new meritocracy feel they deserve all the good things that come their way, while also believing—or conducting and carrying themselves as if they believe—that those stuck on lower rungs of the ladder also deserve their struggles.

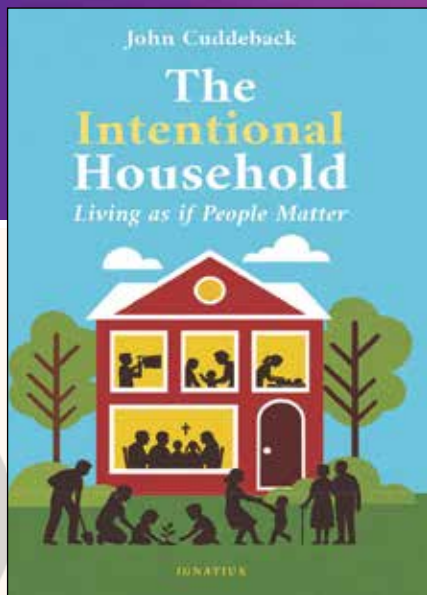
The Populist Paradox

THAT LASCH OFFERS A CONVINCING diagnosis for what appears to be a serious problem does not mean that there is a workable remedy for this problem. Certainly, his book does not provide a battle plan or policy agenda for counterrevolutionaries. The reality is that somebody must run things. A commune or kibbutz is small enough to get along without a hierarchy, but a complex modern society is not.

"Scott Alexander" offered provocative insights on this question in his popular blog, Slate Star Codex. (Alexander was later revealed to be Scott Alexander Siskind, a San Francisco psychiatrist. In 2021 the blog gave way to Astral Codex Ten, a Substack newsletter.) Alexander argued in 2017 that despite the many criticisms brought against meritocracy, no one faced with a dangerous medical procedure dislikes meritocracy enough to be indifferent as to whether it will be performed by a surgeon who graduated medical school at the top of his class or one who graduated at the bottom. Generalize from the universal preference for getting the best surgeon available, Alexander concludes, and you have the core of the anti-anti-meritocracy argument: it is wise to have highly capable people discharging highly important responsibilities.

Alexander comes closer to Lasch and other critics when he says that the biggest problem with our present meritocracy is that it wrongly equates education with merit. Number one people don't always go to number one colleges—or to any college—and number one colleges don't always matriculate and graduate number one people. (In 2015 Yale University computer science professor David Gelernter said that his students were "likable" but "ignorant." It is "very hard to grasp that the person you're talking to...is bright, articulate, advisable, [and] interested," but at the same time "doesn't know who Beethoven is.") Alexander recommends that we reengineer the meritocratic selection process to emphasize specific

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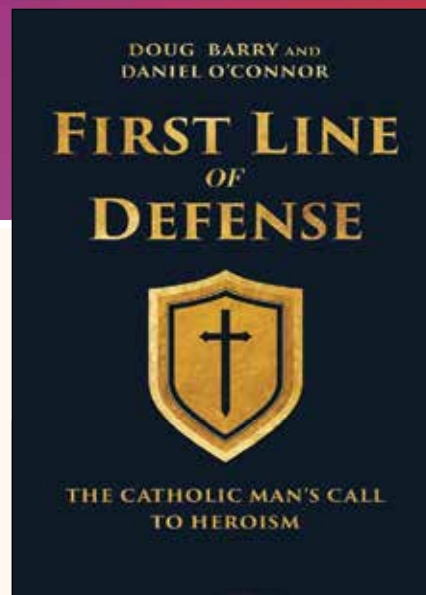
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aptitudes and skills, rather than admission to one of the most selective universities. “Instead of Goldman Sachs hiring whoever does best at Harvard, they should hire people who can demonstrate their knowledge of investing principles or (even better) who can demonstrate an ability to predict the market better than chance.”

No matter how we configure the selection process, however, the problem of the resulting elite becoming insular and self-serving appears to be a chronic one. In a long book review of Soner Cagaptay’s *The New Sultan* (2017) on Turkey’s president Recep Erdogan, Alexander argued that domination by elites is virtually tautological. People who are bright, ambitious and, when necessary, ruthless will figure out what it takes to get on top, and then take the necessary steps. Hoping for a different kind of elite, such as one dominated by the self-effacing and reflective, is a waste of time.

In the ordinary democratic situation, parties comprising specific elites and specific segments of the electorate will compete against one another. In the U.S., Republican victories used to mean that business elites would gain power, and Democratic victories meant that labor leaders and liberal activists would run things. Alexander believes the problem is much harder for a populist party that seeks to redeem a betrayed democracy by opposing elites as such. Because elites ascend through “natural organic processes,” a populist, anti-elitist government “will be arrayed against every other institution in the nation,” including “media, academia, [and] culture.” As a result, “elite government can govern with a light touch,” while a populist government “has a strong tendency toward dictatorship,” since facing every powerful institution makes confrontation a more efficacious approach than negotiation.

Alexander’s conclusion about the threat of dictatorship may be a natural fear for someone who has just finished a book on Erdogan. A different option, the creation of a populist counter-elite—an anti-elitist elite—looks less promising as it receives more scrutiny. The Catch-22 is that it is hard for a populist government to stay in power long enough to incubate such an elite without that elite already being robust enough to provide covering fire for the government. A populist *New York Times*, Harvard, or Hollywood will not be built in a day, or even over the course of two non-consecutive presidential terms. Viktor Orbán was prime minister of Hungary for over 70% of the 28-year period from 1998 to 2026, including 16 consecutive years beginning in 2010, but his defeat in April argues that he needed still more time for the populist institutions he established to become self-sus-

taining. That election, in turn, cast doubt on an American populist government’s ability to secure the many decades in power that would afford the opportunity to square the circle and establish durable populist elites.

Left Conservatism

WHEN I SAY THAT CHRISTOPHER Lasch was an idiosyncratic leftist, I refer to the fact that he has been persuasively described by such astute essayists as Eric Kaufmann and Lee Siegel as a “left conservative”: someone comfortable using activist government, a method usually associated with leftism, to address concerns usually associated with conservatism, such as limiting immigration to fortify national cohesion or promoting respect for long-established social values and institutions. A facet of left conservatism is an attitude that, beginning in the 1990s, social scientists have referred to as “welfare chauvinism,” the endorsement of a robust welfare state, but one whose benefits are limited to citizens rather than foreigners, and which affirms the connection between citizens’ rights and responsibilities, rather than dispenses benefits to expiate social wrongs. The unofficial anthem of Barack Obama’s 2012 re-election campaign was Bruce Springsteen’s song, “We Take Care of Our Own.” The “take care” part was Springsteen and Obama’s core message, but the welfare chauvinist heard unintended corollaries: we have a lesser obligation, if any, to take care of those who are *not* our own; and our obligation to take care of our own presupposes their good-faith efforts to take care of themselves.

Lasch expressed his left conservatism in warnings that the ethos of vigorous capitalism was inimical to the arrangements, habits, and dispositions on which a successful experiment in self-government rested. He developed this theme in earlier works, including *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (1977) and *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (1991). In *The Revolt of the Elites*, Lasch wrote:

The more closely capitalism came to be identified with immediate gratification and planned obsolescence, the more relentlessly it wore away the moral foundations of family life. The rising divorce rate, already a source of alarm in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, seemed to reflect a growing impatience with the constraints imposed by long-term responsibilities and commitments. The passion to get ahead had begun to imply the right to make a fresh start

whenever earlier commitments became unduly burdensome.

Lasch’s objections frequently take the form of arguing that 19th-century apprehensions were vindicated by realities that came to dominate 20th-century American life. Thus, in the 19th century it was “assumed that democracy had to rest on a broad distribution of property,” and that “extremes of wealth and poverty would be fatal to the democratic experiment.” He elaborates the idea that industrialization was America’s fall from grace, because it ran afoul of the pre-Civil War understanding that such important democratic habits as “self-reliance, responsibility, [and] initiative...were best acquired in the exercise of a trade or the management of a small holding of property,” which meant “that democracy had no future in a nation of hirelings.”

It is clear to Lasch that Abraham Lincoln shared these fears. He cites Lincoln’s 1859 speech to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, which argued that while a slave in the South is a slave for life, an employee in the North is an employee only transitionally. “The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile,” Lincoln said, “saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself, then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him.” The exceptions, Lincoln argued, prove the rule: “If any continue through life in the condition of the hired laborer, it is not the fault of the system, but because of either a dependent nature which prefers it, or improvidence, folly, or singular misfortune.” The rule that the exceptions prove is that free labor is the “just and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way for all—gives hope to all, and energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all.”

Syncretic Politics

LINCOLN DID NOT LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO tell us how to respond to the advent of a new system where most people spent their entire adult lives as hired laborers. Nor did Lasch live long enough to expand left conservatism from an “intellectual style,” in Lee Siegel’s phrase, to a framework that could support policy arguments and prescriptions. In his essay on Lasch and left conservatism, which appeared in *The New Statesman* the month after Donald Trump’s re-election, Siegel wrote, “Politics, in America at least, seems to have entered a syncretic phase.” If this is true, the work of synthesizing elements of older political orthodoxies into new ones is much closer to its beginning than its end.

And there is no guarantee that the process will ultimately deliver a coherent orthodoxy significantly different from any now known.

At the moment, the two politicians who could be described with the least difficulty as left conservatives are the aforementioned Josh Hawley, first elected to the Senate from Missouri in 2018, and John Fetterman, a Pennsylvania Democrat elected to the Senate in 2022. The Laschianism of the 2019 Hawley speech to the National Conservatism conference extended beyond criticism of arrogant cosmopolitan elites. The senator went on to say, “The Left champions multiculturalism and degrades our common identity. The Right celebrates hyper-globalization and promises that the market will make everything right in the end, eventually... perhaps.” Even more surprisingly for a Republican politician, Hawley warned that “an economy driven by money changing on Wall Street ultimately benefits those who have the money to start with, and that economy will not support a great nation.”

In 2025, Hawley called in a *Washington Post* op-ed to make it possible for Americans to claim home mortgage interest, charitable contributions, and childcare expenses, as deductions or credits against their payroll taxes (the ones paid into Social Security and Medicare) as well as against income tax obligations. He argued that because two-thirds of Americans have payroll tax obligations greater than what they owe for federal income taxes, it is sensible and fair to “give America’s working people a lifeline by giving them the biggest working-class tax cut in our history.” Later that year, he warned that Republicans’ proposals for “slashing health insurance for the working poor” were “both morally wrong and politically suicidal.” Hawley pointed out that in 2020, the same year his Missouri constituents had voted in favor of Donald Trump over Joe Biden by a margin of 15 percentage points, they had also voted, by a margin of 6.5%, to “expand Medicaid coverage to working-class individuals unable to afford health care elsewhere.”

As for Fetterman, he is objectively at the ideological median of the modern Democratic Party: pro-choice on abortion, friendly to the LGBT cause, a supporter of Bernie Sanders’s 2016 presidential campaign on the grounds that being a progressive “meant raising the minimum wage and taking on big corporations,” as he told *The Washington Post* in April 2026. And yet, Fetterman is likely to face a primary challenge if he seeks a second term in 2028. His heresies are: 1) regarding Israel as a normal country with normal, legitimate security concerns, rather than a genocidal colonizer; and 2) treating

Donald Trump as a normal president, albeit one with whom Fetterman has many policy disagreements, rather than an authoritarian bent on destroying the republic. One of his prospective opponents derides Fetterman as “Trump’s favorite Democrat.” A February 2026 Quinnipiac University poll showed that 46% of Pennsylvanians approved of Fetterman, while 40% disapproved. Yet the partisan splits are confounding. Republican voters favor him overwhelmingly, 73% to 18%. Independents like him, too, by a margin of 48% to 37%. But within his own party, Fetterman is 40 percentage points underwater: Democratic voters disapprove of him by a margin of 62% to 22%.

In short, syncretists like Hawley and Fetterman have their work cut out. The reigning modes and orders will not give way to new alignments of ideas and interest groups without a long fight. In the end, the One Big Beautiful Bill passed by the Republican Congress in July 2025 and signed into law by President Trump did not include the

Will a Republican Party that has working-class voters as the biggest part of its coalition reorient its rhetoric and agenda?

working-class payroll tax cuts Hawley urged, but did include cuts to Medicaid that will, according to the Congressional Budget Office, cause the program to spend nearly \$1 trillion less over the coming decade than it would have otherwise. Senator Hawley, who voted for the bill, which passed the Senate by a margin of 51 to 50 (Vice President Vance broke the tie), later said that he secured some important offsetting benefits for the people of Missouri and would turn his attention to making sure that the Medicaid cuts never go into effect.

Family Business

HIS SUPPORTERS HOPED, AND OPPOSITIONS FEARED, that Donald Trump’s ascension to the presidency heralded seismic changes. Nearly a decade after his first, startling political triumph, it is fair to say that the political continuities with pre-escalator ride America are more striking and important than the discontinuities.

“Trumpism Has Done Remarkably Little to the GOP’s Center of Gravity,” was the title of a recent *Financial Times* article by Michael Strain, director of economic policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. Trump’s 2017 and 2025 tax bills, along with policies on deregulation and domestic energy production “all would have been comfortably at home in a Mitt Romney administration,” Strain argued. The one clear exception he cites is immigration: the restrictionist forces are much stronger within the GOP now than they were before Trump. (And anti-restrictionism has become all but mandatory among Democrats.) We could also add tariffs, for which Trump’s enthusiasm is at odds with the GOP position since World War II, but fundamentally similar to Republican thinking from the 1850s to the 1930s. “Ultimately,” Strain concludes, “most things that make Trumpism distinct from traditional conservatism won’t last because they are not a coherent whole that another politician could easily inherit.”

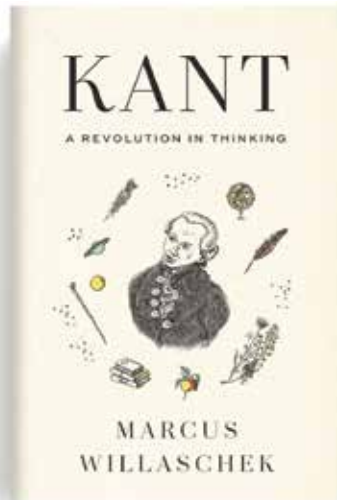
There are, in addition, many breakthroughs that Trump brought about, or made possible: Supreme Court decisions on abortion, affirmative action, and the Voting Rights Act; executive orders that also curtailed affirmative action; defunding public broadcasting; putting universities on the defensive over DEI, anti-Semitism, and the denial of academic freedom; scaling back the federal bureaucracy and funding for government-dependent nonprofit organizations; effecting regime change in Venezuela, while attempting it in Iran and Cuba, with outcomes not yet known but plausibly leading, at minimum, to regime curtailment. The thread connecting these policies is that conservatives have been calling for each of them for decades. Even though there was little evidence before 2015 that Trump was committed to the Republican Party, and even less that he was any kind of conservative, he ended up turning all these discussion items into action items.

“Today I settled all family business,” Michael Corleone says in *The Godfather*. Trump, a man who spent much of his life closing deals and building skyscrapers, and none of it taking careful notes during think tank seminars, governs in the same spirit: There have been enough editorials. It’s time to get things done.

The question is whether the family business can stay the same even as the family itself changes. In December 2024, David Brooks pointed out in *The Atlantic* that Richard Nixon won two-thirds of the votes cast by college-educated whites in 1960 but lost the presidency because John Kennedy

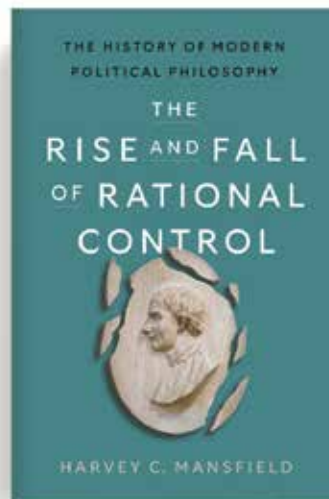
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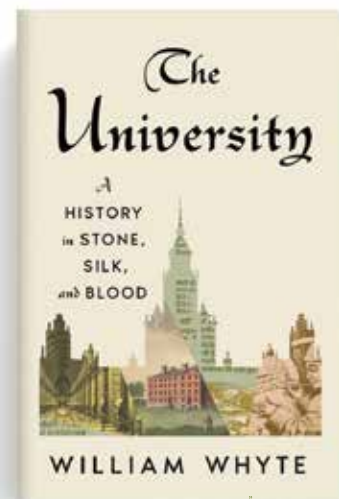
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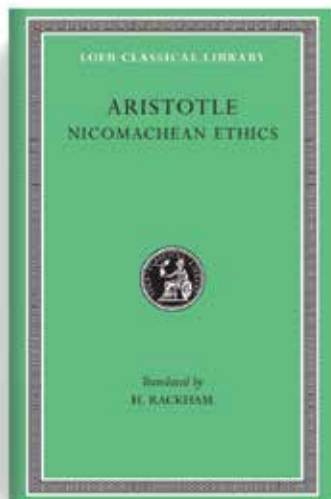
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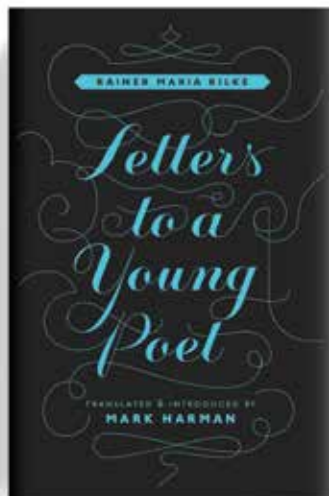
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won a landslide among working-class voters. Donald Trump prevailed in 2024, by contrast, because 57% of voters that year did not have a college degree, 43% did, and Trump won 56% of the former group while Kamala Harris won 56% of the latter. More specifically, Trump won 62% of the votes cast by people who never attended college, 57% from those with a two-year Associate's degree, 45% from those with a four-year degree but no further schooling, and 38% from voters with a graduate or professional degree beyond a Bachelor's.

Will a Republican Party that has working-class voters as the biggest part of its coalition reorient its rhetoric and agenda? So far, the GOP has relied primarily on Laschian denunciations of elites and elitism, and secondarily on promoting prosperity through deficit spending and tax cuts, loose monetary policy, and a tight labor market created by immigration enforcement. The delivery of tangible benefits in Trump's first term made him—before Covid upended the election—the favorite to win a second term in 2020. The recollection of the Trump economy was sufficiently approving that, according to Chris Whipple's book on the 2024 campaign, *Uncharted* (2025), Harris campaign officials were flummoxed by "Trump amnesia," as they called it: reminding voters how awful things had been with Trump in the White House frequently elicited the response that they had actually been pretty good, especially compared with the Biden years.

The sour national mood of 2026 is a continuation of how people felt during the Biden Administration, not the sharp break from high prices and economic challenges that led swing voters (and swing states) to favor Trump over Harris. In the same way that just about any investing strategy looks

smart during a bull market, any political strategy seems shrewd for a leader or party in power when times are good. When they're not, we learn whether the politicians are agile enough to react and recalibrate.

There's a joke about a Catholic priest who gives an Episcopalian counterpart his review of *The Book of Common Prayer*: "You left in all the pretty parts and took out all the hard parts." For Trumpists, the pretty parts of *The Revolt of the Elites* are the denunciations of upper-class liberal snobs. Placing the attendant resentments front and center has allowed Trump and an increasingly Trumpist GOP to win close but impressive victories. A less favorable political environment will force consideration of what are, for Republicans, the hard parts of Lasch, which foreground the leftism of left conservatism. Because parties usually go where their voters are, an increasingly working-class GOP is apt to become more receptive to Josh Hawley's tentative departures from conservative orthodoxy than to AEI scholar Michael Strain's reaffirmation of it.

Besides caution and inertia, however, the reasons orthodoxies are hard to dislodge include the fact that they *became* orthodoxies because they had explanatory and prescriptive force. Republicans' skepticism about social welfare programs has long been based on fears that the programs are likely to prove ineffective or counterproductive, cost far more than their advocates promise, and prove politically impossible to eliminate no matter how badly or expensively they fail. In the 93 years since the start of the New Deal, such fears have been vindicated with depressing frequency.

It would be quite strange to see the emergence of an explicitly Big Government GOP even as Sweden, the social democratic para-

digm, is moving resolutely to reduce public spending and give wider scope to private enterprise. In May, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that, after government outlays rose to 70% of GDP in the early 1990s, a level business and political leaders concluded was untenable, Sweden has cut taxes, unemployment benefits, and housing subsidies, reformed the pension system, privatized many public services, and reduced interest paid on public debt from over 10% of GDP in the late 1980s to under 1% today. (In the U.S. it's 4%.)

Perhaps, then, there is a more promising synthesis of the concerns that animate Donald Trump's Republican Party with those that animated Ronald Reagan's. Rather than enter an unwinnable bidding war with Democrats to increase social spending, Republicans could argue that America needs to emulate Sweden's successes and corrections, leaving Democrats to keep insisting that we emulate that country's mistakes. The goal, in short, is not a bigger welfare state but a better one, realized through: eliminating failed and redundant programs; helping those people in greatest need while constantly encouraging self-reliance, responsibility, and initiative, as Lasch advised; and making as many programs as possible *either* federal or state responsibilities, rather than ambiguous mixed ventures where several governments are sort of responsible but none are clearly and simply in charge. America's welfare state, in other words, yields too little welfare and too much state. Promising to change that would be good politics, and effecting those changes would be good governance—the best kind of syncretism.

William Voegeli is senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books.

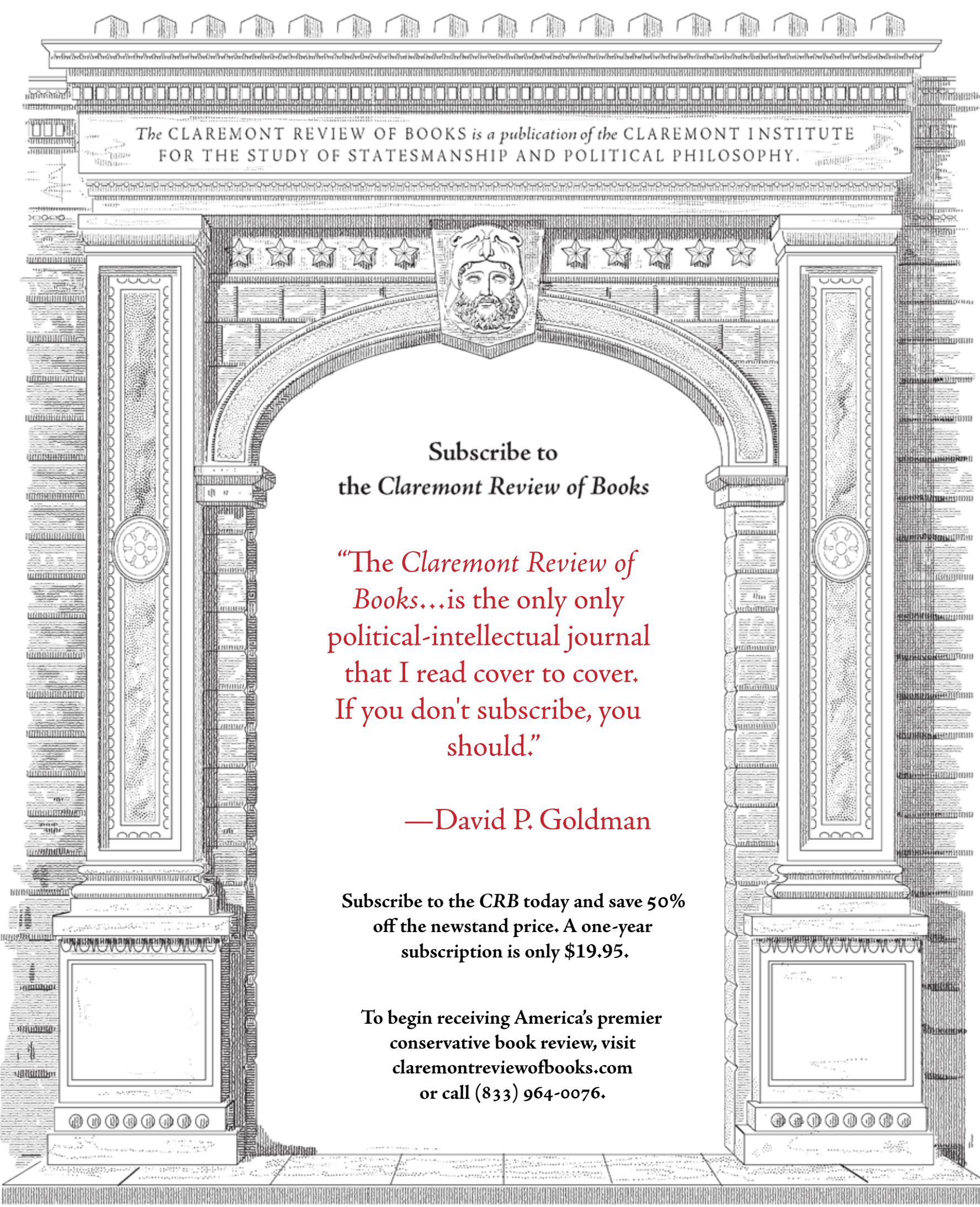
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